Words to the Cross - No. 4
"And when the centurian, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, 'truly this man was a son of God.'" Mark 15:39

LIFE FOR A LOOK

IN THE DREADFUL DRAMA OF THE CROSS THERE WERE MANY FACES AND VOICES DEPICTING MANY DIFFERENT TYPES OF PEOPLE. THERE WERE THE WEEPING WOMEN WHOSE HEARTS AND SPIRITS WERE BROKEN AT THE DEATH OF THEIR LORD. THERE WERE THE ONES WE HAVE DISCUSSED: THE SHOUTING GAPING CROWD THAT WANTED RELIGION WITHOUT A CROSS. THERE WERE THE PRIESTS AND SCRIBES THAT SHOUTED AT HIM, "HE SAVED OTHERS: HE CANNOT SAVE HIMSELF." THERE WERE THE THIEVES THAT DIED ON EITHER SIDE OF HIM AND THE SOLDIERS WHO ALWAYS LIKED SOMETHING EXCITING AND DRAMATIC.

AMID THE CYNICAL TAUNTS AND BITTER JEERS OF THOSE WHO SPOKE TO THE CROSS THERE WAS ONE THAT SOUNDED A DIFFERENT NOTE ALTOGETHER. IN THE CROWD THAT HAD GATHERED ON CALVERY THERE WAS A CENTURIAN, A MAN WHO IMMORTALIZED HIMSELF BY PERCEIVING WHAT HE HAD DONE AND TO WHOM HE HAD DONE IT. ALONG WITH THE THIEF, HE ALONE IN THE WILD THRONG WAS IMPRESSED WITH THE TRUE NATURE OF THIS MAN THEY HAD EXECUTED. HE ALONE HAD HIS EYES AND EARS OPENED BY THE POWER OF THE EVENT.

WE DO NOT KNOW HIS NAME, BUT WHOEVER HE WAS, HE COULD PROBABLY HAVE TOLD US BETTER THAN ANY OTHER MAN THE HISTORY OF THOSE HOURS ON CALVARY. HE WAS CALLED CENTURIAN A BECAUSE HE COMMANDED ONE HUNDRED MEN: HIS DUTIES AND STATUS WERE SIMILAR TO THOSE

OF A CAPTAIN IN OUR ARMY. WE CAN ASSUME THAT IT WAS HIS ASSIGNMENT TO EXECUTE THIS PARTICULAR CRUCIFIXION AND THAT HE AND HIS MEN HAD BEEN GUARDING JESUS FROM THE TIME OF HIS ARREST AND TRIAL. HE WOULD HAVE SEEN HIS SOLDIERS GIVE JESUS THE CROWN OF THORNS AND PURPLE ROBE TO SATIRIZE HIS ROYALTY. HE WOULD HAVE WITNESSED THE DREADFUL BEATING CARRIED OUT ONPILATES ORDERS. HE WOULD HAVE BEEN IN CHARGE OF THE SQUAD OF SOLDIERS THAT ACCOMPANIED JESUS AS HE CARRIED HIS CROSS ALONG THE ROAD THAT LED TO CALVARY. HE WOULD HAVE SEEN HIM FALL UNDER THW WEIGHT AND NOT COMPLAIN: HE WOULD HAVE SEEN THE FORTITUDE WITH WHICH HIS PRISONER CONTROLLED THE NATURAL TERROR IN THE FACE OF SO HORRIBLE A DEATH: HE SAW HOW THIS MAN UNDER THE VILEST MOCKERY AND SCORN, UNFLINCHINGLY WALKED ONWARD.

BUT THE CENTURION SAW MORE. AS A SOLDIER HE WAS OFTEN BROUGHT INTO CONTACT WITH DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION. CRUCIFIXION WAS A LONG AGONY, AND MEN WERE A LONG TIME DYING, IT TOOK HOURS, SOMETIMES DAYS. CRUCIFIXION WAS NOT A VERY COMPLICATED MATTER. THE VICTIMS WERE TIED TO THE CROSSBEAM AND TO THE UPRIGHT BEAM AND OCCASIONALY NAILS WERE ADDED AS A DIABOLICAL REFINEMENT OF PAIN. THERE THE VICTIM WITH ROCKS, GARBAGE AND JEERING WORDS, UNTIL THE DISLOCATIONS OF THE SHOULDERS PLUS UNBEARABLE EXHAUSTION, HUNGER AND THIRST COMBINED TO GIVE THE RELEASE OF DEATH.

BAKED BY THE SUN
↑PELTED

ON THIS PARTICULAR OCCASION, THE CENTURIAN'S MEN HAD NAILED JESUS TO THE CROSS, AND HAD SAT DOWN TO CAST LOTS FOR HIS GARMENTS AS THEY WATCHED HIM DIE.

THE CENTURION HAD SEEN JEWISH PRISONERS BEFORE, SHRIEKING IN AGONY LIKE MADNESS: HE HAD SEEN THEM GO DOWN ON THEIR KNEES BEFORE HIM BEGGING FOR MERCY, FIGHTING TO ESCAPE, STRUGGLING WITH THE SOLDIERS WHO WERE TRYING TO CRUCIFY THEM. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING PECULIAR THIS TIME. THE ONE ON THE MIDDLE CROSS HAD DONE NONE OF THESE: THE CENTURIAN HAD NEVER SEEN ANYONE BEAR WITH SUCH MAJESTY THE RIDICULE AND PAIN OF THE CROSS. HE MADE NO NOISE, NO SCREAMS OF AGONY ISSUED FROM HIS LIPS, NO PETITIONS OF MERCY. THERE WAS NO RESISTANCE, NO STRUGGLE--ONLY A GREAT SILENCE, BROKEN BY THE SOBBING OF WEEPING WOMEN.

THIS WAS ONE WHO FORGAVE THOSE THAT HAD SENT HIM TO HIS DEATH. SEVEN TIMES HE HAD SPOKEN, AND WHAT WORDS THEY HAD BEEN, EACH ONE HAD PIERCED THE HEART OF THE CENTURIAN. AS HE LISTENED, HE MUST HAVE WONDERED IF BY ANY CHANCE THE ENEMIES OF JESUS HAD BEEN MISTAKEN. AND THEN TOO AS THE END DREW NEAR THE MAN ON THE CENTRAL CROSS SEEMED TO GROW STRONGER RATHER THAN WEAKEN: IT WAS AS IF DEATH WERE NOT COMING TO ENVELOPE HIM--BUT AS IF HE WERE GOING OUT TO MEET DEATH: AS IF HE HAD SOMETHING TO DO AND ACCOMPLISH. THIS MAN WAS NOT DYING AS OTHER MEN HAD DIED!

AND THEN AT THE VERY SECOND OF HIS DEATH HE SPOKE OUT IN A LOUD CLEAR VOICE--"FAHTER, ~~XXXXXXX~~ INTO THY HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT" WHEN THIS ROUGH, HONEST SOLDIER HAD WITNESSED ALL THAT HAD HAPPENED--THAT JESUS HAD DIED IN SUCH A WAY, HE SAID, "TRULY, THIS MAN WAS A SON OF GOD!"

THIS WAS A TREMENDOUS THING FOR HIM TO SAY. DISCIPLINED ROMAN CENTURIANS WERE NOT LIKELY TO BE HEARD PUBLICALLY SAYING THAT A PRISONER, CONDEMNED AND SENTENCED BY NO LESS A PERSON THAN PILATE WAS ("A SON OF GOD.") THE CAPTAIN DOES NOT USUALLY CRITICIZE AN ACT OF HIS COMMANDER IN CHIEF. BUT THIS CENTURIAN COULD NOT KEEP IT TO HIMSELF. "SURELY THIS WAS A SON OF GOD" HE BLURTED OUT SPONTANEOUSLY.

HE WAS A MAN THAT HAD FOUND LIFE FOR A LOOK. THE CENTURIAN COULD NOT HAVE REALIZED THE FULL SIGNIFICANCE OF WHAT JESUS WAS DOING AS HE DIED ON THE CROSS. BUT WE DO KNOW THAT THE CENTURIAN, WHEN HE LOOKED UPON JESUS SAW ONE FOR WHOM LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, ONE WHO SEEMED TO THINK THAT ALL THAT MATTERED IN THE WORLD WAS TO DO GOD'S WILL: AND WHO SURRENDERED HIMSELF COMPLETELY INTO GOD'S ~~XX~~ HANDS TO CARRY OUT THAT WILL. IT WAS THIS THAT MADE HIM CRY OUT WORSHIPPINGLY FULLY "TRULY, THIS WAS A SON OF GOD."

AT LEAST AS HE SURVEYED THE CHRIST ON HIS CROSS, HE WAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED AND SENSED THAT THIS JESUS DID NOT BELONG WITH THE ORDINARY CLIMATE OF OPINION, BUT HAD A MYSTERY AND SPLENDOR IN HIS CHARACTER THAT AWED ~~THE CENTURIAN~~ HIM TO MAKE THIS

ASTONISHING AVOWAL. THE CENTURION MIGHT POSSIBLY HAVE RESENTED THE UNPLEASANT DETAIL ASSIGNED HIM: BUT THROUGH IT HE HAD OBTAINED A COMPLETELY NEW VISION OF LIFE'S MEANING. THE CROSS AND THE CHRIST ON IT, HAD REVEALED TO HIM THE HEROISM OF LOVE, THE GLORY OF SACRIFICE, AND THE DIGNITY OF VICARIOUS SUFFERING.

ALL THESE THINGS WHICH HAD HAD SEEN HAPPEN FORCED, EVEN FROM THE LIPS OF A BRAVE ROMAN CENTURION, WORDS OF ADMIRATION AND WORSHIPFUL THOUGHTFULNESS AS HE REALIZED THAT (ONLY A SON OF GOD COULD DIE LIKE THAT.) THE EXPERIENCE AT THE FOOT OF THE CROSS HAD OPENED THIS MAN'S EYES.

THE CENTURIAN SAW JESUS AS ONE TO WHOM LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THE GUIDE OF ALL HIS ACTIONS AND THE GOAL OF HIS LIFE.

JESUS NEVER HARSHLY CONDEMNED MEN AS SINNERS EXCEPT IN THE CASE OF THE SELF ENAMORED, SELF RIGHTEOUS. WITH PEOPLE AND THEIR PROBLEMS HE APPEARS ALWAYS TO HAVE USED THE METHOD OF LOVE. CONSEQUENTLY WE FIND HIM SEEKING OUT MATTHEW, LOVING AND APPRECIATING HIM AS A MAN, (PERHAPS MATTHEW'S FIRST EXPERIENCE OF SUCH TREATMENT,) AND THEN WE SEE MATTHEW LEAVING A PROFITABLE RACKET AND FOLLOWING THE ONE WHO HAD CALLED HIM IN LOVE. WE SEE ZACHAEOUS, WHOSE KEEN BUSINESS INSTINCTS HAD

HAD SHUT HIM OFF FROM THE FRIENDSHIP OF OTHER MEN, INSTANTLY MELTING INTO AS*

TONISHMENT AND GENEROSITY WHEN LOVE TOUCHED HIS HARDENED LIFE. WE SEE A HARD

WOMAN OF THE STREETS WHO HAD NEVER KNOWN ANYTHING BUT SIMULATED LOVE, BREAKING DOWN

COMPLETELY BEFORE CHRIST WHO LOVED HER AS A DAUGHTER OF GOD.

WE WHO ARE ON THIS SIDE OF JESUS CAN SEE EVEN MORE THAN THE CENTURION SAW, FOR WE KNOW,

AS HE DID NOT, THAT THE LOVE DEMONSTRATED ON CALVARY WAS NOT ONLY THE LOVE OF THE

MAN JESUS, BUT THE LOVE OF OUR GOD POINTED STRAIGHT AT US. ONE CANNOT STAND

UNMOVED WHEN HE IS STRUCK WITH THE REALIZATION THAT GOD ALMIGHTY CAME DOWN TO THE

SWEAT AND DUST OF THE ARENA OF THIS EARTH: AND WENT TO THE AWE INSPRIING LENGTH OF

THE CROSS. ONE CANNOT BE UNMOVED WHEN HE KNOWS THAT THE CREATOR ENDURED DEATH ITSELF

IN ORDER TO DEMONSTRATE HIS LOVE, AND IN ORDER TO WIN OUR LOVE FOR HIM. WE CANNOT

REVIEW THE STORY OF THE CRUCIFIXION WITHOUT BEING PROFOUNDLY MOVED BY THE KNOWLEDGE

THAT GOD WOULD FACE ANY DEGRADATION JUST TO RECONCILE OURSELVES TO HIMSELF.

A NEWSPAPER EDITOR WENT TO SEE THE PASSION PLAY AT OBERAMMERGAU AND CAME AWAY

SAYING TO HIMSELF IN AWE ("THIS IS THE STORY THAT HAS TRANSFORMED THE WORLD") WHAT

A DIFFERENCE IT WOULDMAKE IN OUR LIVES, IF BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US ("WE COULD LET

LOVE BECOME THE GUIDE OF ALL OUR ACTIONS AND THE GOAL OF ALL OUR LIFE.") WHAT A

DIFFERENCE IT WOULD MAKE IF ALL OUR ENERGIES WERE POINTED AND CHANNELED BY LOVE. THE WELL KNOWN ~~XXX~~ CLINICAL PSYCHIATRIST DR. KARL MENNINGER ONCE SAID "DIE WE MUST, ULTIMATELY, BUT IN THE MEANTIME WE CAN LIVE--IF WE LOVE."

THE CENTURION WAS STRUCK BY THE LOVE OF JESUS AS HE DIED. WE KNOW THAT LOVE, WE HAVE SEEN IT IN OUR LIVES AND IN OUR WORLD, WE CAN LOOK AT THE 2,000 YRS. OF CHRISTIAN TESTIMONY TO ITS PRESENCE. AND YET FOR MOST OF US, WE FIND IT DIFFICULT TO EMPLOY IT OURSELVES. EVERYBODY AGREES THAT THERE ARE FEW PROBLEMS THAT COULD NOT BE PENETRATED AND SOLVED BY LOVE, HOWEVER, IT IS A PRESCRIPTION OFTEN GIVEN, BUT RARELY TAKEN.

THE LOVE SHOWN BY JESUS WAS THE FIRST THING THAT IMPRESSED THE CENTURION: THE SECOND WAS HIS BELIEF THAT THE THING THAT MATTERED MOST WAS GOD'S WILL, AND HIS SHEER DETERMINATION TO CARRY OUT, WHATEVER THE COST.

IT WAS PROBABLY THE FIRST TIME THE CENTURION HAD SEEN JESUS, BUT THE DISCIPLES COULD HAVE TOLD HIM HOW THIS SPIRIT OF DETERMINATION, THIS STEADFASTNESS OF PURPOSE WERE CHARACTERISTIC OF JESUS' ENTIRE LIFE. HE MADE THIS ADJUSTMENT TO GOD'S WILL EVEN IN THIS CRISIS BECAUSE SUCH HAD BEEN HIS WAY OF LIFE. FROM THE VERY BEGINNING AS HE MEDITATED ALONE IN THE DESERT ABOUT HIS TASK HE HAD RESISTED EVERY TEMPTATION

TO SEEK HIS OWN GLORY: AND HAD CONSTANTLY DETERMINED TO PUT GOD'S WILL FIRST IN HIS LIFE.

WHEN HE TAUGHT HIS DISCIPLES HOW TO PRAY, JESUS SAID THAT ONE OF THE CENTRAL PETITIONS IN EVERY PRAYER SHOULD BE THAT ("GOD'S WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN.")

IN HIS OWN SHORT LIFE TIME EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY HOUR WAS DEVOTED TO THIS END. HIS DAYS WERE SO FULL OF ACTIVITY THAT IT MAKES US TIRED TO READ ~~EMXX~~ ABOUT THEM. THE APPEALS THAT CAME TO HIM WERE ENDLESS. EVERYBODY WHO CAME TO HIM FELT THAT HIS OWN NEED WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND NEEDED TO BE ATTENDED TO WHATEVER ELSE HAD TO ~~BE~~ BE PUT ASIDE. AND ALWAYS, SOMETIMES WITHOUT WAITING FOR THE END OF THE PLEA, OUR LORD WAS UP ON HIS FEET SAYING ("LET US GO AT ONCE.") HE SPENT HIMSELF WILLINGLY AND EAGERLY ~~SAXX~~ TO MEET THE CLAMOROUS NEEDS PRESENTED TO HIM, HIS ONLY DESIRE IS SUMMED UP IN HIS OWN STATEMENT ("MY FOOD IS TO DO THE WILL OF HIM WHO SENT ME, AND TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WORK.")

AT TIMES IT IS DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND THAT GOD HAS A WILL, A PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES. IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW A HOUSEWIFE, STEELWORKER, SECRETARY OR LAWYER POSSIBLY COULD PERFORM THE WILL OF GOD, (EVEN IF HE DOES HAVE ONE FOR US.) IF YOU HAVE THOUGHT

THIS YOU ARE CERTAINLY NOT ALONE, IT IS A QUESTION THAT IS WELLNIGHT UNIVERSAL. EVERYONE CANNOT BE A MINISTER OR A MISSIONRY, OR EVEN A SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER, HOWEVER WE ARE STILL PERFECTLY SERIOUS WHEN WE PLEDGE TO TRY TO DISCOVER GOD'S WILL FOR OUR LIVES AND TO DO IT.

DOING GOD'S WILL FOR MOST OF US CAN BE DESCRIBED IN TERMS OF A LIFE OF LOVE THAT WE HAVE TALKED ABOUT PREVIOUSLY. A HOUSEWIFE WHOSE LIFE IS FILLED WITH KINDNESS, OF SELFLESS GIVING TO CHILDREN AND HUSBAND IS LEADING AN EXISTENCE EVERY BIT AS MEANINGFUL AS THE MISSIONARY THE STEEL WORKER WHO PUTS INTO PRACTICE THE COMMAND (LOVE THY NEIGHBOR) IS DOING GOD'S WILL FOR HIS LIFE EVERY BIT AS MUCH AS THE MINISTER. WE CAN DO GOD'S WILL BY PUTTING TO USE WHAT WE BELIEVE (WHAT THE CHRIST HAS SHOWN US.

THE CENTURION SAW ALL THESE THINGS AS HE WATCHED THE CRIST DIE. LOVE, TRUST, DEVOTION FLASHED BY HIS MIND, AND IN THEM HE SAW REAL LIFE. IN A MOMENT OF REVELATION AND EMOTION HE WAS FORCED TO CRY OUT"SURELY THIS WAS THE SON OF GOD" (He Got Life for a look)

IN HOLY WEEK THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION WILL BE CELEBRATED TWICE, ON MAUNDY THURS. AND AT EASTER SUNRISE. AND IN THESE SERVICES YOU WILL HER THE SACRED WORDS, "THIS IS MY BODY WHICH IS BROKEN FOR ~~MANY~~ you." XXXXMXXX THIS IS MY BLOOD WHICH IS SHED FOR MANY." IN THESE MOST IMPORTANT SERVICES LET US EACH ONE THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT A GOD THAT LONGS FOR OUR LOVE---AND TRY IN ALL HUMILITY TO ANSWER BY SAYINGH AND THIS

LORD, IS MY BODY WHICH I GIVE TO YOU. AND THIS LORD, IS MY LIFE WHICH IS READY TO BE SPENT FOR YOU."

THIS IS THE RESPONSE THAT IS APPROPRIATE. WHAT THE CENTURION SAW, MAKES IT SO. AS WE MOVE EVER CLOSER TO THE HALLOWED EVENT LET US EACH ONE PLEDGE ANEW TO LET OUR LIVES, E CH IN OUR OWN WAY, BE THE INSTRUMENTS OF GOD'S WIL.

LET US, WITH THE CENTURION TAKE A LONG LOOK AT CALVARY AND IN SO DOING SEE THE WAY OF LIFE--LET US, TOO, GET LIFE FOR A LOOK.